Building resilience during the forced isolation: Experiences of tenacious academics of the Open University of Sri Lanka

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Abstract
The purpose of this paper is to report on the resilience of the faculty academics of the Open University of Sri Lanka who embarked on the online journey to support the isolated learners during the Covid-19 lockdown. A total of 225 academics responded to the questionnaire administered immediately after the lockdown, resulting in a 66% response rate. Findings revealed that 10% of academics had already completed their activities, 53% had engaged in online teaching before and during the pandemic while 17% had commenced only during the pandemic. In contrast, 20% had not gone online. This study focuses on the 17% who responded promptly to support learners during this unexpected situation. The challenges were categorized as learner-centric; teacher-centric and institutional-centric. Learner-centric challenges were focused on learner issues such as access issues related to devices, internet connections, data, etc., and how to design alternative strategies to increase learner engagement. Teacher-centric challenges were upskilling knowledge and skills associated with online learning, balancing official workload with personal commitments, etc. Institutional-centric challenges were related to obtaining essential support services remotely. These tenacious academics demonstrated how they build their resilience to face unexpected situations through self-regulatory mechanisms. This study provides some insights into building resilience for future educational endeavours.

Introduction
The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) is the only single mode national university in the country delivering study programmes through Open and Distance Learning (ODL) for the past four decades. The OUSL delivers its study programmes using a set of specially designed printed course material to facilitate independent learning where learners can study at their own place and pace. In addition, these printed course material are complimented with asynchronous and synchronous teaching methods both via online courses and face-to-face instruction.

Commencement of study programmes and their teaching and learning activities including continuous assessments/examination times are well planned and scheduled at the beginning of each academic year. The scheduled dates informed to learners in advance through activity diaries/schedules at the time of the registration of each study programme for smooth running of the study programme to minimize inconvenience to learners who are studying at a distance. Feedback loops are integrated to each study programme at various stages of the programme for continuous improvements and to maintain the quality standards of study programmes.

However, all these pre-planned activities for the learners of the OUSL came to an abrupt halt due to the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic which affected our lives unexpectedly, immobilizing all human activities across all the countries in the world instantly and made the whole world stand still. We have never experienced such a phenomenon in our lives and made us so out of focus and vulnerable.

Almost all countries have enforced closure of all schools and universities immediately (UNESCO, 2020). The Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) also declared indefinite closure of all educational institutions (Hayashi et. al. 2020) and an island-wide curfew was imposed as a preventive measure of spreading the disease among citizens.

In view of this situation, academics had a mammoth task of carrying out teaching learning activities at home along with the duties of the home front. Even though the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) conducts most of its activities at a distance as an ODL university, however the planned academic activities especially the synchronous teaching activities were abruptly disrupted to a greater extent and had to either postpone or cancel immediately. In addition, they have to think of finding alternative strategies in keeping learners engaged throughout this uncertain period entirely via virtual platforms.

The purpose of this study was to investigate on the resilience of the faculty academics of the OUSL who embarked on the online journey to support the isolated learners during the Covid-19 lockdown and to find out the challenges they faced under forced isolation.
Context

The COVID-19 pandemic has tremendous effect on the lives of people across the world irrespective of their location, wealth, prestige, social behaviour etc. It changed the whole world instantly disrupting all the human activities across the globe. Almost all countries have implemented closure of schools and universities (UNESCO, 2020) and declared localised curfew. In view of this situation, the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) also declared indefinite closure of all educational institutions since 12th March 2020 (Hayashi et al. 2020) and an island-wide curfew was imposed to minimize the spread of the disease. This lockdown situation created unexpected challenges in all day to day activities in the country including higher education.

The OUSL, being the premier, single mode national university offering study programmes through Open and Distance Learning (ODL) also had to undergo this difficulty. All its academic and non-academic activities such as student admissions, teaching-learning activities, assessments and examinations, graduations, etc. were disrupted to a greater extent and were temporarily postponed. The GoSL imposed ‘work from home’ option to all the government servants since 20th March 2020. The OUSL management also announced its academic staff to recommence their teaching-learning activities solely through online mode with immediate effect. Facilitating this task for both teachers and learners, the GoSL initiated to provide free internet access to all national universities through the Lanka Education and Research Network (LEARN), enabling data free access to online teaching (Hayashi et al. 2020). Furthermore, it provided free Zoom accounts and training to use Zoom technology for teaching so that academics could immediately commence their teaching remotely via Zoom. Thus, academics in all national universities were compelled to use Zoom technology and they mostly used it as a medium to deliver their conventional lectures.

However, online teaching is not a novel phenomenon to the academic community of the OUSL. They have been engaged in online teaching since 2003 and nearly 300 online courses were available for the academic year 2019/2020, by the time of closure of the university due to COVID-19 pandemic. These online courses were mostly supplemental, around 50 blended level courses where 20% of total marks were allocated for online assessments and one fully online course delivered through the official Learning Management System (LMS); ‘OUSL Elearn’ which was customized to local context using the free open source LMS “Moodle”.

A total of 900 courses are offered currently by the OUSL, and transforming all these courses to online mode at once was a daunting and challenging exercise for all the academic staff of the OUSL especially under a forced isolation. The majority of these academics were trained on online course design and development by the Centre for Educational Technology and Media (CETMe). The CETMe is a dedicated entity for administering the online course delivery from the front end of the LMS; facilitating the design and development of online courses, reviewing them and maintaining quality standards of online courses before uploading to the delivery server in addition to training academics on online teaching.

Owing to this COVID-19 outbreak, commuting from one place to another was severely restricted due to lock-down in the country. As a result, engage in teaching learning activities; both onsite and offsite was a challenge to both teachers and learners at this juncture. Some of them had kept their devices either in the office or boarding places and not planned for this sudden outbreak. As a result, all the stakeholders faced a severe challenge at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic to implement the decision imposed by the university authority to commence online learning.

Theoretical Framework

The resilience theory has been used widely over the years spreading across many fields starting from ecology to education administration. Moreover, with the growing emphasis on environmental sustainability, the term resilience has become a predominant concept in climate change adaptation, disaster risk management and sustainable development (Manyena 2006; Adger 2000; Nelson, Adger & Brown 2007). Since this study focuses on a situation where the academics had no control but had to fulfill a mission by engaging in teaching learning activities, the resilience theory framework was chosen as the most appropriate framework to investigate how individual/organization and community responded to a crisis situation under pressure.

Literature review

The term resilience was first conceptually introduced by Holling (1973) to understand the true nature of ecosystems where the capacity of ecosystems persists beyond their original state despite external disruptions. Thus, Holling defines resilience as “a measure of the ability of ecological systems to absorb changes of state variables, driving
variables, and parameters, and still persist” (Holling 1973, p. 18 cited in Tiernan et al (2019)). Since then, many researchers have used the term “resilience” as an umbrella term to explain adaptive capacities of individuals, human communities and larger societies (Linnenluecke & Griffiths 2010; Nelson, Adger & Brown 2007; Norris et al. 2008) in responding to external stresses, major disruptions and new circumstances (Holling 1973; Kapucu, Hawkins & Rivera 2013; Manyena 2006; Mileti 1999; Norris et al. 2008) in diverse disciplines such as Psychiatry (Flach, 1988), Psychology (Higgins, 1994), Social Sciences (Henderson & Milstein, 1996) and Education Administration (Geocaris, 2004).

Resilience can be usefully conceptualized as a characteristic of a system when considered as a whole. Traditionally a “stable” system was defined as strong, static and resistant to change (Manyena 2006). Currently, a stable system is viewed as one that is flexible and able to adjust to stress, remaining more or less the same within a range of conditions (Holling 2001; Thompson et al. 2009).

Research Questions

The following research questions were investigated in this study:

- Research Question 1 – What were the challenges experienced by the OUSL academics in developing/delivering new online course/s during this Covid-19 outbreak?
- Research Question 2 – How the OUSL academics have built their resilience to address the challenges faced during the COVID-19 outbreak?

Research design and methodology

Research design used for this exploratory study was a mixed research design combining both quantitative and qualitative methods. The unit of analysis of this study was the Faculty academics of the OUSL.

The data collection instrument, which was an online questionnaire was designed using Google form, was tested with five academics of the CETMe and modified with their feedback. It consisted of both closed and open questions enabling learners to express their views freely on their involvement in online teaching during the COVID pandemic period.

The questionnaire was designed in such a way to capture the experiences on the challenges faced by the academics when delivering online courses in complete isolation. The questionnaire was administered to all the Faculty academics to find out how they had taught OUSL learners during the COVID-19 lockdown period. The Google link was circulated to all the academic members of the OUSL through the OUSL email list (ALLOU). Three reminders were sent weekly through the OUSL email list. Later, personal reminders were sent to the non-respondents to increase the response rate.

Results and discussion

A total of 225 out of 341 Faculty academics belong to the six faculties responded to the questionnaire administered immediately after the lockdown, resulting a 66% response rate which is above the accepted standard response rate of 60% for surveys (Fincham, 2008). Respondents had to indicate the challenges they faced between March to July 2020, where they had to work under forced isolation after the immediate declaration of the decision taken by the OUSL to commence teaching only via online.

Findings indicated that 53% had delivered online courses both before and during the COVID pandemic period, 17% had delivered only during the period, 10% had already completed their academic activities and 20% had not delivered any online course.

This study focuses on the 17% who had not engaged in online learning before but responded immediately to support learners during this unexpected situation. Their copying strategies and how they build resilience were explored in-depth. The demographics of these academics were illustrated in Table 1.
Table 1: Demographics of the academics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>45%</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>24-29</th>
<th>30-34</th>
<th>35-39</th>
<th>40-44</th>
<th>45-49</th>
<th>50-55</th>
<th>56-60</th>
<th>61-65</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>8%</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Professor</th>
<th>Associate Professor</th>
<th>Senior Lecturer (Grade I)</th>
<th>Senior Lecturer (Grade II)</th>
<th>Lecturer</th>
<th>Lecturer (Probationary)</th>
<th>Lecturer (Contract)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>1 year or less</th>
<th>1-5 years</th>
<th>6-10 years</th>
<th>11-15 years</th>
<th>16-25 years</th>
<th>More than 25 years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Training on Online learning</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>58%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

Even though these academics started developing online courses during this COVID pandemic from March to July 2020, only seventy one percent had delivered online courses. The majority of the academics who delivered the courses used the official OUSL Elearn platform (89%). In contrast, 7% used the Open Learn platform while 4% had used Zoom/google meet. The majority had delivered two online courses (17%). The type of online courses developed were predominantly supplemental (42%), closely followed by blended courses (32%) where 20% of total marks were allocated for online assessments. Eighteen percent had delivered both supplemental and blended courses, whereas 8% had gone for delivering exclusively online courses (online plus). Most of them had developed online courses alone (38%), some have sought the assistance from the CETMe via phone/email/whatsapp etc. to get the pedagogical support (3%), technical support (24%), both pedagogical and technical support (11%) while 24% had contacted their colleagues.

With the new introduction of Zoom technology the majority (84%) had used it for their synchronous teaching rescheduling onsite face-to-face sessions and also to motivate and engage learners during this difficult time period. Nevertheless, only 58% felt that they had remained as effective teachers amidst all these challenges while 37% indicated “somewhat” and 5% stated that they were not effective at all.

**Research Question 1** – What were the challenges experienced by the OUSL academics in developing/delivering new online course/s during this Covid-19 outbreak?

Having gone through the responses given to the open-ended questions by the 38 respondents, their major challenges were identified using content analysis. These challenges were further categorised into major themes and sub-themes (Table 2). Two respondents stated that they did not experience any challenges.
Table 2: Challenges experienced by the OUSL academics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major theme</th>
<th>Challenge</th>
<th>Supportive quotation extracted from the open ended questions</th>
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These challenges were categorized into three distinct themes; learner-centric, teacher-centric and institutional-centric. Learner-centric challenges were focused on learner issues such as access issues related to access devices such as desktop/laptop computers/mobile phones, internet connections, data issues, etc., and how to design alternative strategies to increase learner engagement. Teacher-centric challenges were upskilling knowledge and skills associated with online learning, balancing official workload with personal commitments, etc. Institutional-centric challenges were related to the inadequate existing infrastructure facilities and the inadequate support services and mechanisms essential to work effectively in remote settings.

The next section will explore the second research question.

Research Question 2 – How the OUSL academics have built their resilience to address the challenges faced during the COVID-19 outbreak?

Table 3: Copying strategies used by the academics to overcome challenges

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Copying strategies</th>
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| **Technical issues (Access) – Lack of facilities/devices/internet interruptions** | - Purchased additional equipment / connections to prevent internet interruptions  
- Tried to get assistance from the internet provider  
- Used personal broad band internet connection/dongles/mobile phones  
- Used different communication methods to contact students and got the technical support if necessary  
- Conducted day schools using zoom app  
- Logged remotely and fixed technical and compatibility issues  
- Used alternative strategies and provided instructions. |
| **less participation from students** | - Asked questions randomly during the teaching learning sessions  
- Requested to keep the videos on during the lecture  
- Made students engaged in every 15 minutes time by giving them an activity using moodle and zoom breakout room option.  
- More homework assigned  
- Posted revision questions as assignments  
- Posted self-assessing questions to engage in learning with the course materials  
- Uploaded the recordings of online sessions and provided the ZOOM video link in the elearn platform/emails  
- Repeated the sessions  
- Got students’ phone numbers with the help from IT unit and provided details to the students who did not participate in sessions.  
- Contacted students at the examinations to identify reasons for not attending online sessions and their answer was “inability to take leave for online sessions” |
| **Lack of competency/training** | - Got help from known people/colleagues/online  
- View youtube videos on the web  
- Got assistance form CETMe staff  
- Followed several workshops on online  
- Viewed YouTube videos of popular YouTubers to make the sessions interactive  
- Prepared well before the sessions |
| **Staff time** | - Manage my own time schedule by engaging more time exceeding standard duty hours  
- Prioritize and manage workload |

When analysed the narrative accounts on how they mitigate these challenges, all had clearly indicated the use of alternative strategies/mechanisms showing many copying strategies such as positive self-esteem, self-efficacy, adaptability, perseverance, strong coping skills, a sense of coherence with their peers and other supportive groups, and a high tolerance to face challenges to support learners. These resilience strategies are embedded in Sri Lankan
culture supporting the cultural dimensions of Hofstede’s framework, exhibiting preference for family, values and taking collective responsibilities for others with high tolerance (Jayatilleke and Gunawardena, 2018).

Conclusion

These tenacious academics demonstrated how they build their resilience individually to face unexpected situations in this forced environment using self-regulatory mechanisms. The findings also showed that some challenges were beyond their control for instance access issues related to technical matters. Thus, the institution should enable remote support mechanisms to those who need to experiment novel ideas and create a safer and secure environment so that these early adopters will emerge to thrive as successful individuals in turn may act as change agents in building resilience to increase productivity and establishing sustainable development practices for the future endeavours.

References


Thompson, I., B. Mackey, S. McNulty, and A. Mosseler. 2009. Forest resilience, biodiversity, and climate change: A synthesis of the biodiversity/resilience/stability relationship in forest ecosystems. Retrieved from Montreal